Theory and Practice in ELT: The Teacher as Mediator

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In the continual assessment of current teaching materials and a systematic endeavor to design more appropriate ones, we see an effort to make the materials compatible with changes and innovations in the underlying disciplines of linguistics and psychology.

Research in these two fields gave birth to classroom procedures that focused on the teaching of structures and vocabulary. In syllabus design, textbooks were stuffed with lists of language structures and lexical items which the teacher was to present, drill, and exploit.

These teaching tasks-presenting, drilling, and exploiting-determined to a large extent the profile of the foreign-language teacher. Teaching became a highly skilled operation that was the outcome of hard practice and strenuous observation. Teacher training was based mainly on observation of actual teaching sessions, reinforced by micro-teaching to equip the trainees with discrete teaching skills.

While these practices are still found in teacher-training courses, important changes have been introduced at the theoretical level. Communicative language teaching, for instance, is usually presented as a reaction against former approaches and as a reinforcement and justification for new teaching procedures. Student teachers who receive such training are made to believe that the main objective of the course is to preach communication-oriented teaching.

Resistance to Change

Despite all this, schools are still full of grammar-oriented teachers who refuse to embrace the new trend. These are some of the reasons for teachers' reluctance to conform to the change:

1. Some teachers reject the new trend only because it is "new." As in other domains, traditionalists refuse to change the status quo.

2. Some teachers think that the new approach has introduced an element of disorganization into the materials. In their opinion the merit of structural materials is that they are based on sound criteria of selection and grading.

3. Another category of teachers simply feel more secure with the presentation-drilling techniques that they have been manipulating for years.

4. Others fail to understand the purpose of the new strategies adopted in the design of materials and in the techniques of implementation in the classroom. These teachers will adopt a structural approach to teaching even if the materials assigned are functional.

5. Conversely, there are those who, out of a sense of duty, will carry out the instructions in the teacher's book to the letter, despite their failure to understand the underlying theoretical assumptions of the tasks they are asked to perform.

Listing these categories of teachers brings into focus a crucial element: the attitude of the individual teacher towards the new reforms and his/her role in the spread of innovative modes of teaching. Widdowson argues that "language teachers have the responsibility to mediate changes in pedagogic practice so as to increase the effectiveness of language teaching." And he adds: "such mediation depends on understanding the relationship between theoretical principle and practical technique" (Widdowson 1984:87). In other words, the new type of teaching materials, as well as the new classroom procedures, call for an alert type of teacher whose role includes far more than merely following the instructions without prior understanding and analysis.

The Teacher's Role

Teachers should be made aware of the role they have to play in the teaching operation as a whole. The majority of teachers relate to applied linguistics as subordinate recipients. They take it for granted that it is the responsibility of the linguist, as a theoretician, and the applied linguist, as a mediator, to find solutions for classroom problems and discover new ways of approaching various practical issues. Such a view yields the following picture:

Linguistics >>> Applied Linguistics >>> Teaching

According to this view, the relationship between the three fields is uni-directional, with teaching at the receptive and passive end. This top-down relationship keeps the teacher's role within the confines of the classroom and restricts his/her responsibility to carrying out the "commands" in the teacher's book.

A more appropriate model is proposed by Campbell (in Stern 1983:36) in which the arrows in the above diagram are bi-directional, giving an interactive aspect to the model. In this view, not only is the teacher as practitioner guided in his work by the applied linguist, but the latter draws on what actually takes place in the classroom.

Stern (1983:44) suggests a more comprehensive model: including a number of other disciplines, such as anthropology, educational theory, history of language, and psychology. His model puts the context of language learning/teaching as an interlevel between level one, including the aforementioned disciplines, and level three, including methodology and organization. Stern says that his model

should serve, above all, as an aid to teachers to develop their own "theory" or philosophy . . . in answer to these questions: "Where do you stand on basic issues?" "How do you see your own teaching?" "What is your view of language and language learning?" "What needs to be done to teach language X or Y?" and so on. (Stern 1983: 43-45)

As the above models suggest, any language activity in the classroom is the outcome of many variables and the product of an ongoing interaction between various theoretical levels. Therefore, any teaching task should be well thought out, and second-language teachers should be able to answer questions like Why have you chosen this text? Why have you used this technique? What are the objectives of the activity? How does it fit into the language course as a whole? How successful was the lesson? and so on. The answers to these questions should be traced back to the underlying foundations of language teaching. In other words, teachers should be able to relate a simple classroom exercise to deeper and more theoretical considerations.

Similarly, second/foreign language teachers should be able to account for the specificities of the teaching situation. The assigned textbook is usually designed with potential learners in mind. Sometimes it is even tried out and subsequently revised before it is used. However, the teacher is in a better position than the textbook writer to know what his/her pupils need, what their interests are, and what should be done to adjust these interests to the requirements of the school curriculum.

The Teacher as Lesson Planner

In the light of what has been said, teaching should not be equated with, nor limited to, carrying out the directions in the teacher's book. Although these should not be rejected altogether, teachers ought to design their own lesson plans, keeping the instructions they think are appropriate, adapting the ones that can be adapted, ignoring what is not suitable, and even inserting their own activities and supplementary materials if need be.

By designing their lesson plans, foreign-language teachers adopt a multifaceted approach. The textbook is there to guide them as far as the focus of the lesson is concerned, but they must take into account the context and the learners. Teachers who would do this should be able to resort to their knowledge of the underlying bases in the three fields of methodology, syllabus design, and testing.

It is obvious that lesson planning is central to any teaching activity. This does not mean that the lesson plan should replace the textbook; both are necessary for effective teaching. However, unlike the textbook, the lesson plan is "ephemeral" in a positive sense. That is, it is subject to changes in the context that stands for the setting, the pupils, their learning styles, the time of the lesson, and the objectives of the course. Lesson planning is a process, and, as indicated in the diagram, this process is controlled by an evaluation that parallels and goes hand in hand with all the teaching activities.

The teacher's competence-including both pedagogic and linguistic competence -interacts directly with the textbook. The diagram puts the textbook writer and the teacher on an equal footing. A horizontal interaction goes on between them, and a vertical interaction involves each of them with, at the upper end, the three mother disciplines and, at the lower end, the context of teaching.

Up-to-date Mediators

This diagram helps us see the complexity of the teaching act. It considers the teacher as mediator, eliminating the imaginary line between applied linguistics and teaching. The profile of the teacher as passive executant, which used to prevail, is no longer valid. Therefore, unless teachers try to keep abreast of the literature on second/foreign-language teaching, they will not be able to understand the rationale of recent and changing classroom practices, nor will they be able to "mediate" between theory and practice in order to design and evaluate their own lessons.

References

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